

Mule Deer

Description:

Mule deer are "mule like" in that they have large ears about $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of their head. Because of the resemblance to the large ears of mules, mule deer are also known as "Muleys" or "Burro Deer." Mule deer are probably the most common large-game animal in Idaho, with a population of over 300,000.

A Different Sort of Deer

If you couldn't see those distinctive large ears, how else would you know it was a mule deer? Mule deer, while closely related to the white-tailed deer, have their own distinct attributes. The mule deer's tail hangs down, unlike the uplifted, bushy, all-white tail of its cousin. Mule deer have a unique bounding movement, distinctly different from the leisurely, graceful leaps of the white-tailed deer. The mule deer have a stiff-legged almost leap where all four feet seem to leave the ground at the same time. With this movement, they can reach a speed of 45 mph for short distances. Mule deer antlers are normally smaller and branch to form two equal forks, while the white-tailed deer has forward curving antlers with a number of points, called tines, branching from the main beam. As the days get longer, the antlers grow more. The antlers start growth in spring and are shed after the breeding season from February to April each year.

Mule Deer Can Live All Over

Where are you going to see a mule deer? Mule deer are found in coniferous forests, shrub steppe, chaparral, and grasslands with shrubs, from dry, open country to dense forests. They are often found near new growth vegetation and vegetation resulting from disturbance, especially near farms. In some areas, the mule deer uses old-growth forests almost exclusively in winter and spring. In Idaho, mule deer prefer rocky brushy areas, open meadows, open pine forests, and burns. While mule deer occupy almost all types of habitat within its range, it seems to prefer arid, open areas and rocky hillsides.

When are you going to see a mule deer? Mule deer are active primarily in mornings and evenings. Their inactivity during the heat of the day conserves water and keeps their body temperature within livable limits. Sweat glands and panting also provide cooling during hot periods.

All Part of the Food Chain

Mule deer eat a wide variety of woody plants, primarily during the winter when snow covers grasses and forbs. Mule deer have a multi-part stomach with the first two chambers acting as temporary storage. Food in these chambers can be digested later when the deer chews its cud. Common plants in a mule deer's diet include aspen, dogwood, juniper and Douglas fir. They graze on various grasses, forbs, and shrubs heavily during spring, summer and fall and occasionally feed on agricultural crops.

After eating those plants, mule deer complete the food chain by becoming food for others. Mule deer are the primary prey of mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, and occasionally golden eagles prey on yearlings and fawns. How do mule deer keep from being eaten? Mule deer fawns have white camouflage spots for the first one to two months and are further protected by having little or no scent. Adult mule deer have a light, gray-buff color which disguises them from predators. Also, the distinct stiff-legged gait of the mule deer offers two advantages: it allows the deer to out distance predators, and to see above the thick brush. If necessary, they can turn or completely reverse direction in the middle of a bound. Because their large ears can trap sound well, a mule deer's sense of hearing is extremely acute. In addition to natural predators, hunters shoot thousands of mule deer each year; a popular big game animal in Idaho.

Reproduction and Offspring

The peak of the mule deer's mating season, or rut, is mid November to mid December. As the males attempt to round up the females, dominance is largely determined by size, and the largest and most successful males usually possess the largest antlers. A buck will find a doe and they will often play chase games at breakneck speeds before mating, remaining together for several days. A doe will usually produce a single fawn the first year she gives birth, then twins in following years. Females usually breed at two years, males at three to four years. Fawns weigh about six pounds at birth and are reddish brown with white spots. Does, fawns, and yearlings tend to stay together as a family group but remain separated from other similar family groups. Bucks tend to be solitary or in small groups (two to four) during the rut.

Are They Really Everywhere?

The mule deer can be found in a diversity of habitats from southeastern Alaska, south through Canada and most of western U.S. and Great Plains, to Baja California and the southern end of the Mexican Plateau. They also range east to the western edge of Minnesota. They are especially common throughout Idaho and the rest of the intermountain West. Their home ranges are directly linked to availability of food, water, and shelter.

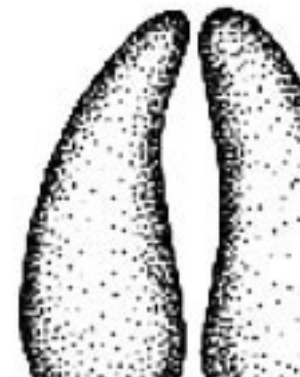
During late fall, they migrate from high, mountainous country to lower valleys and foothills to avoid heavy snow. Mule deer do herd during the winter in specific areas that have a healthy combination of shelter and food. Severe winter conditions can reduce their populations drastically.

Mule Deer Initiative

www.muledeer.org



Mule Deer
© John Pennoyer



Footprint
No Map
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Mule Deer
2. **Scientific Name:** *Odocoileus hemionus*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: Male - 200 to 350 lbs.
Weight: Female - 125 to 175 lbs.

Height (at shoulder): 3 to 3.5 feet.
Length: 4 to 6.5 feet.
5. **Diet:** Sagebrush, Aspen, Douglas Fir, grasses, forbs and shrubs.
6. **Young:** 1 or 2; called fawns.
7. **Lifespan:** 10-15 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Artiodactyla
Family: Cervidae
9. **Hunted in Idaho:** Yes
10. **Hunting Link:**